

The Personal Shadow

Although this chapter occurs about halfway through the book, I've chosen it for the download, because the personal shadow is where the fly sticks to the paper for most of us.

Throughout *Shadow in the USA*, I follow along behind a classic version of *Beauty and the Beast*, gradually letting aspects of the old story introduce readers to the psychological phenomenon known as the human shadow. At this point in the old story, Beauty finds herself sorely puzzled that the Beast—who was so frightening and hideous and powerful—could also be so thoughtful, and generous, and kind.

Well, that *is* the puzzle, isn't it? We want things to be black or white, good or evil, for us or against us—Joseph Campbell called this “a function of Biblical thinking”—but it's just not that easy. People are complicated. Life is complicated. The simplest human impulse stems from gnarled, ancient roots.



There is no one particular way to act or feel that can be worn around like a suit of armor and used in every situation. Every archetype—every instinctual impulse of human nature—has a value and a use. *{And a danger.}* Sometimes I'm the goddess of wisdom, sometimes I'm the village idiot.

Let's say an accident happens right in front of you and simple physical strength on your part will save someone's life. You'll be as strong as a giant in an instant, without even thinking about it. You'll lift up that rock or pull the door off that car, no problem. But since giants are dumb as stumps and extremely boorish, you'll push your giant offstage and call up your prince charming when the TV crews arrive. By the time a newsperson sticks a

microphone in your face you'll be polite, well spoken, and no stronger than normal. There's an entire cast of archetypes milling around inside each one of us, just *longing* for the chance to appear on stage. The entire ensemble of myth, tale, dream and evolution stands waiting in the wings of our psyches.

However, human beings tend to get typecast into one role. We learn this role in our family-of-origin theatre, and then we continue to play it out on the world stage. We dutifully don our masks and go out and perform "I'm cute," or "I'm a loser," or "I'm smart," or "I'm a victim" or *whatever*, day after day after day, just as if we *were* characters trapped in fairy tales. Unless knocked off balance by some sort of unforeseeable disaster—earthquake, flood or famine—we tend to muddle along all through life stuck in one persona.

Look at poor Beauty: kind, long suffering, beautiful and dutiful. Now *there's* a limited role for you. And how could such a role possibly be sustained for a human lifetime? Could a girl dedicated to a role like this ever admit she'd been mean, or told a lie? Could she own up to farting, or feeling horny? Could she simply be in a bad mood? Of course not! She has to be perfect. Blameless.



So if she were human, and dedicated to performing a 'Beauty' of a role like this, her options would be limited. She could push a bad mood way down into the forbidding forest of her unconscious, denying she knows anything at all about it—and/or—she could blame all her bad moods and shortcomings on someone else.

Carl Gustav Jung, generally considered to be one of the 'big three' fathers of modern psychoanalysis (Freud, Jung, Adler), first coined the term "human shadow." *{As well as the terms introvert, extrovert and complex. He was also instrumental in identifying which basic psychological processes a person tends to use the most, which led to Myers-Briggs type personality tests.}*

Jung used the word "shadow" to describe the parts of the psyche that a person doesn't want to—usually just *can't*—think about or acknowledge. It refers to the repressed, un-lived side of your normal daytime personality—the stuff you don't like about yourself, the stuff you don't want anyone to know about you.

Thus your shadow assuredly contains negative qualities, such as envy or prejudice or insecurity. And it could even contain positive qualities, such as compassion or artistic ability. But these qualities, whatever they are, stay in your mind's shadow because you don't like to—in fact, most of the time you simply *can't*—admit you possess them. Some parts of ourselves we like to show to others—put out into the light—and some parts of ourselves we like to hide—keep in the shadows.

Coming up with the word 'shadow' for this process was a stroke of genius. It gives us a mythological way of looking at a common psychological problem, and symbolically it is a very good fit. Your shadow can't be smelled or tasted or touched or felt, yet it is very firmly hooked to you, attached to all the creases and crevices and neurons of your ego. And while other people can see your shadow without too much trouble, you'd have to turn your head around to be able to see it.



There's also a nifty paradox built into both meanings of the term: whether it's a shadow cast by light in the natural world or a shadow cast by your mind, **the brighter the light, the darker the shadow**. Some of the vilest, most grotesque acts in history have been done—and are still being done right this very minute—in the name of **God**, which is the brightest light we've ever been able to imagine.

The enchantments and bewitchments that occur over and over again in fairy tales are reminders. Warnings. Because most of us fall into an enchantment at one time or another. We mis-understand the stories. We glorify one type of role to the extent that we think we're supposed to *be* Beauty, or *be* a hero, then we stick ourselves into that role and try *not* to be anything else.

We just get stuck. In the process of trying to fit into our role—as athlete or honor student or class clown or skinny woman or powerful businessman or

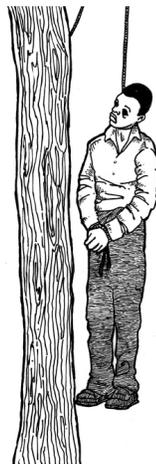
laidback dude or hardened gang member or devoted disciple—we deny the very existence of any part of ourselves that doesn't fit neatly into that role. We deny we have any desire to skip class, or eat the whole bag of cookies, or blow off work today, or hop into bed with a total stranger.

And we usually can manage to cram all those contrary desires way down into our shadows. *{What contrary desires? I don't see any!}* That is, until we wake up one day and find ourselves doing something *really* stupid and totally “out of character.” Out of character... out of the role we've chosen—or were told—to play. Which was probably a fairy tale character's role, from a fairy tale family, in a fairy tale setting, and not humanly possible in the first place. It's sad and poignant—as well as poisonous and highly paradoxical—that despite the evil increasing exponentially around the world, most of us are trying so hard to be good.

Denying parts of your psyche on a daily basis is called repression, and it creates another ongoing problem called regression. If I can't even admit I have certain feelings—if they shame me, or they scare me, or if they're not permitted in my culture—those feelings are not going to look the same when they slip past my conscious guard. Those feelings will have regressed.

Re-gress is the opposite of pro-gress. To regress is “to go backwards.” The parts of myself I just can't stand to think about will get *less* human the longer I refuse to acknowledge them. The longer I pretend not to know anything at all about some part of myself, about a basic instinctual impulse of my own, the grosser and coarser and hairier and wilder that abandoned part of myself is going to get, like a troll living under a bridge, or a castaway all alone on an island.

What makes a bunch of good ole boys who usually hang out down at the café go out and lynch a black man?



Or beat a gay man to death and leave his body dangling from a barbed wire fence? What makes one commuter pull out a gun and shoot another commuter over an insignificant driving mistake? Who does the actual torturing in a torturous regime? Who flogs a woman for wearing finger nail polish? Were these people all *born evil*?

No. No one is born evil. However, we are all capable of a distinct downward slide as we move through life... from re-pression to re-gression to ag-gression.

Whenever we try to appear angelic on the surface, the devil inside dances. As soon as we're certain that our way is the only way, imps start to grin. If we can't admit being wrong... can't calmly discuss important issues... simply won't tolerate other points of view, much less change our minds when faced with new evidence... if we are *obviously* much cooler and smarter, and other people are *obviously* much lamer and dumber... that's bewitched. Self-enchanted. Firmly stuck in a one-dimensional, fairy tale view of the world.

And there's only one way to break such a spell: to take off the mask. To face the fact that every person on earth—you, me, and the guy in the corner booth over there—is just as much Court Jester as Wise King, just as much Wicked Witch as Snow White.

To go ahead and admit we're not always perfect, so we can start to do something toward mending our mistakes.

